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Referrals Patterns to an Oncology Clinical Advice Service

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UK Clinical Oncology departments provide clinical advice to colleagues and other disciplines regarding inpatient/outpatient care, often via trainee-led 24-hour helpline. At the Cancer Centre Belfast City Hospital, patient queries within 6 weeks of treatment completion are triaged via nurse-led 24-hour helpline, assessments in person are carried out in a dedicated AOS unit.

All referrals from a sample of specialty trainee on-call shifts were prospectively documented September 2016-April 2017. Over 41 on-call shifts spanning 400 hours (41% shifts and 76% documented hours were 'out-of-hours'). 177 calls were received. Mean referral frequency was highest on Monday, lowest on Tuesday. Cases referred were inpatients (60%), in the emergency department (20%), or outpatients (20%). 40% referrals originated within the Cancer Centre (wards 46%, radiotherapy 24%, nurse-led helpline 24%, outpatients 6%).

Referrers were most often ST, CT or FY2 doctors (see Figure 1). Referrals came mainly from Clinical Oncology, General Medicine, Emergency Medicine, and Medical Oncology staff. Referral frequency peaked 1800-1900 and troughed 0800-0900 (see Figure 1). Median duration from most recent Oncology appointment to referral was 14 days (0 days - 5.9 years). Cases were not known to Oncology in 12% referrals. 16% referrals resulted in a hospital admission.

The three most common reasons for referral were requests for clinical assessment, clinical management advice, and consideration of radiotherapy. The three most common presenting complaints prompting a referral were new neurology, back pain and pyrexia.

We wish to highlight that a range of healthcare professions of various experience levels, hospital disciplines and clinical settings have access to specialist advice from Clinical Oncology. Referrals follow a diurnal and weekly pattern. Specialty Trainee-led referral telephone cover provides exposure to a breadth of potential learning scenarios and is an essential component of an AOS. Specialty trainees need appropriate senior support and time to provide an on-call service.

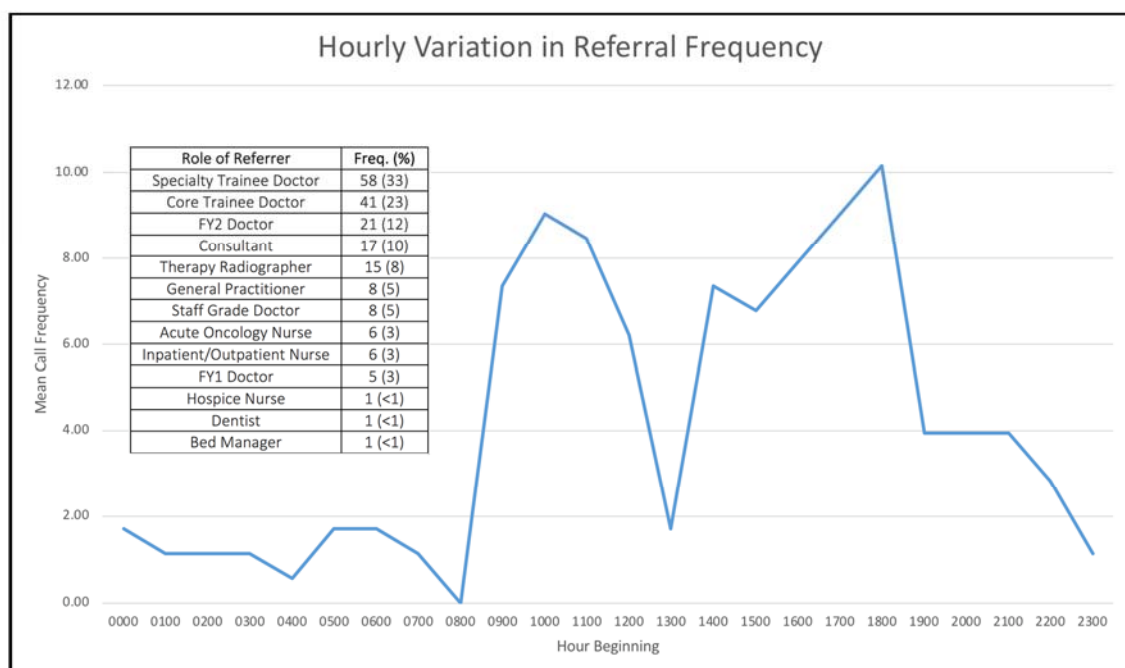


Figure 1: Hourly variation in referral frequency (graph) and role of referrer (table)